

LA TUNISIE
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SFAX, THE LITTLE CHANNEL AND THE RAMPARTS

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SFAX, CAPITAL OF THE SOUTH



As from today, I know another capital because Sfax which I have just visited bears all the characteristics of a first city. Throughout the ages, certain cities have been marked by their geographical position to play crucial roles in history. The people can pass, the empires collapse and the migrations occur, as nature chooses, but a city remains always master. Devastations are of short duration and soon new cities are born from the accumulated ruins. Look at the map of

SFAX, MONUMENT A PAUL BOURDE, CRÉATEUR DE L'OLIVERAIE DE SFAX, PAR M^{ME} SERRUYS

Tunisia. Separated from Tunis by nearly two hundred kilometers, located at an end of the gulf of Gabes, having shipping lanes of first order, sheltered by the proximity of the Kerkennah islands, in the middle of one of the most productive olive groves in the world, Sfax was fated to become the economic pivot of the south, of what is today the Regency and which, from time immemorial, was Africa.

After having provided successively to Athens, then Carthage, Rome and Constantine their supply of oil, the area of Sfax has had the chance, with the French occupation, to see its situation still strengthened by the discovery and exploitation of the phosphates from Gafsa.

In a normal period, the port of Sfax exports nearly two million tons of phosphates, and receives more than thousand tons of fish. Finally the indigenous or Italian fishermen annually unload several million francs worth of octopus and sponge.

That indicates how vibrant the city is that feeds such a port. Everything is picturesque, unexpected, and new there, and particularly the fishing, the major local



GOURBI À ATMELITA, ISLAND OF GHARBI, THE KERKENNAH ISLANDS



TUNISIAN OLIVE TREES

industry. On all the coast, from Sfax to Gabès and Jerba the “harvest” of sponge is a curiosity. It operates in four ways. In the shallows of a few meters, the sponge is picked with the kamakis, a kind of three-pronged fork difficult to handle and which hooks onto the desired sponge.

At depths of from ten to forty meters, they are caught by diving. The men who devote themselves to this estimable sport are physically adapted so much that they can spend three minutes diving. To go more quickly to the sea bed and not waste time in the descent, they hold a lead weight which takes them down in a few seconds. While the mass is sent up by a separate line, the plunger picks the sponges, puts them in a special pocket and, at the end of three minutes, is brought back from his trip. This is the most productive fishing, the most economical, but also the most painful. The fishermen who devote themselves to it develop their chest so much by the breathing that it becomes deformed and that their arms are attached to the rib cage very far back from the normal position.



SFAX, THE RAMPARTS IN THE BACKGROUND, THE FONDOUK, ARAB MARKET

As a Tunisian journalist had written these details, a doctor from Paris contradicted it. At a distance, a bet was concluded... and won by a Tunisian, because a diver from Adjim reached a depth of fifty-one meters, remained there three minutes, and brought back sponges, which exceeded even the conditions of the bet.

At depths exceeding forty meters fishing with a net, known as gangave, is allowed but it is closely supervised because it destroys even the smallest sponges and compromises their reproduction. Indeed, the net trailing along the sea-bed removes everything without distinction.

Lastly, there is a large amount of fishing by diver, which is very productive but also very expensive.



LA GRANDE MOSQUÉE (FIN DU X^e SIÈCLE)

Some books praised the ingeniousness of the fishermen with the prowess of the divers of Ceylon. And some Europeans make this long journey. However, one can sometimes go a long way to admire something that one already has nearby. The fishermen of Sfax are quite as admirable as those of Hindustan.

From October to January, the gulf of Gabes is covered with fishing boats. There may be more than five hundred Italian boats, a thousand local boats and some Maltese or Greek ships. This is, on the sea, a true naval “encampment”.

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Phosphates, sponge, oil (four hundred native oil mills and some large French factories), fishing, weaving, are the wealth of this area which counts more than 200,000 inhabitants including 80,000 for Sfax alone.

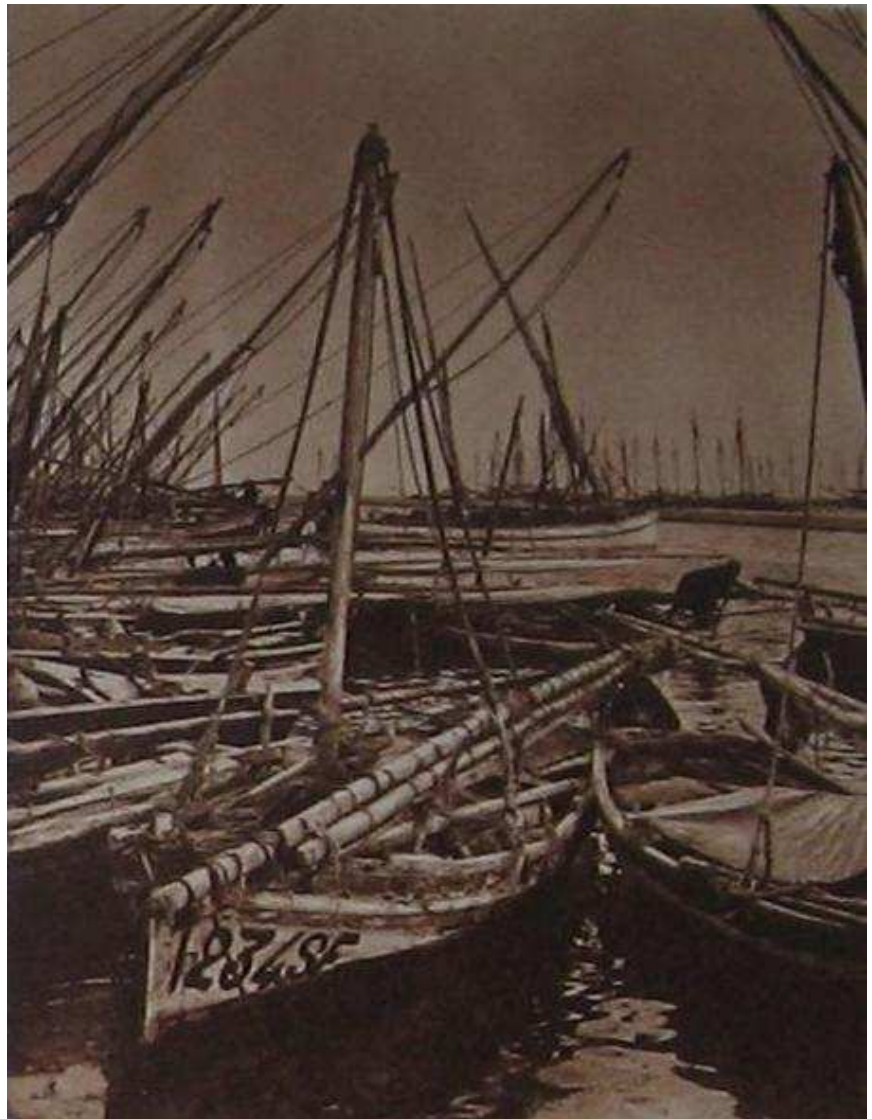


SFAX, TOWN HALL

Also, the new capital, French Sfax, has itself a great attraction. Only forty years old, it is already vigorous, flourishing... and this is not its last word. Since the beginning, it has had a grand vision. The streets are spacious, the boulevards planted with palm trees are lined with high buildings and the terraces of the cafés noisily overflow the vast roadway. The principal building, at the same time Town hall, Prefecture and museum, occupies a building in the best taste with a light bell-tower from where the view embraces the indigenous city as well as the French city.

This building, in the city center, boasts attractive broad windows, a monumental staircase, rooms where they have very judiciously reconstituted the mosaics in ancient tones.

A double garden decorates the common house. On its northern frontage, with dark foliage, a cenotaph to the War Dead carries its French and Arabic inscriptions, thus linking those who have fallen for the same cause. On the southern frontage, in front of the very comfortable Hotel Oliviers, a white stele surmounted by a mosaic of gold merges in the same dedication a civil



BARQUES DE PÊCHEURS D'ÉPONGES DANS LE PORT DE SFAX

controller and a caïd who, together, gave to this city its charm and fixed its destiny.

The other buildings are perfectly well built in the Moorish style, a little pretentious however. Schools, the Post Office building, the Municipal Theatre, are practical, clean and vain monuments. But this quite characteristic European city with its plan and its beautiful buildings, this merry and animated city is not the true capital. That, the old but vibrant city of life, is concentrated behind old 8th or 9th century walls.



SFAX, A STREET IN THE MEDINA

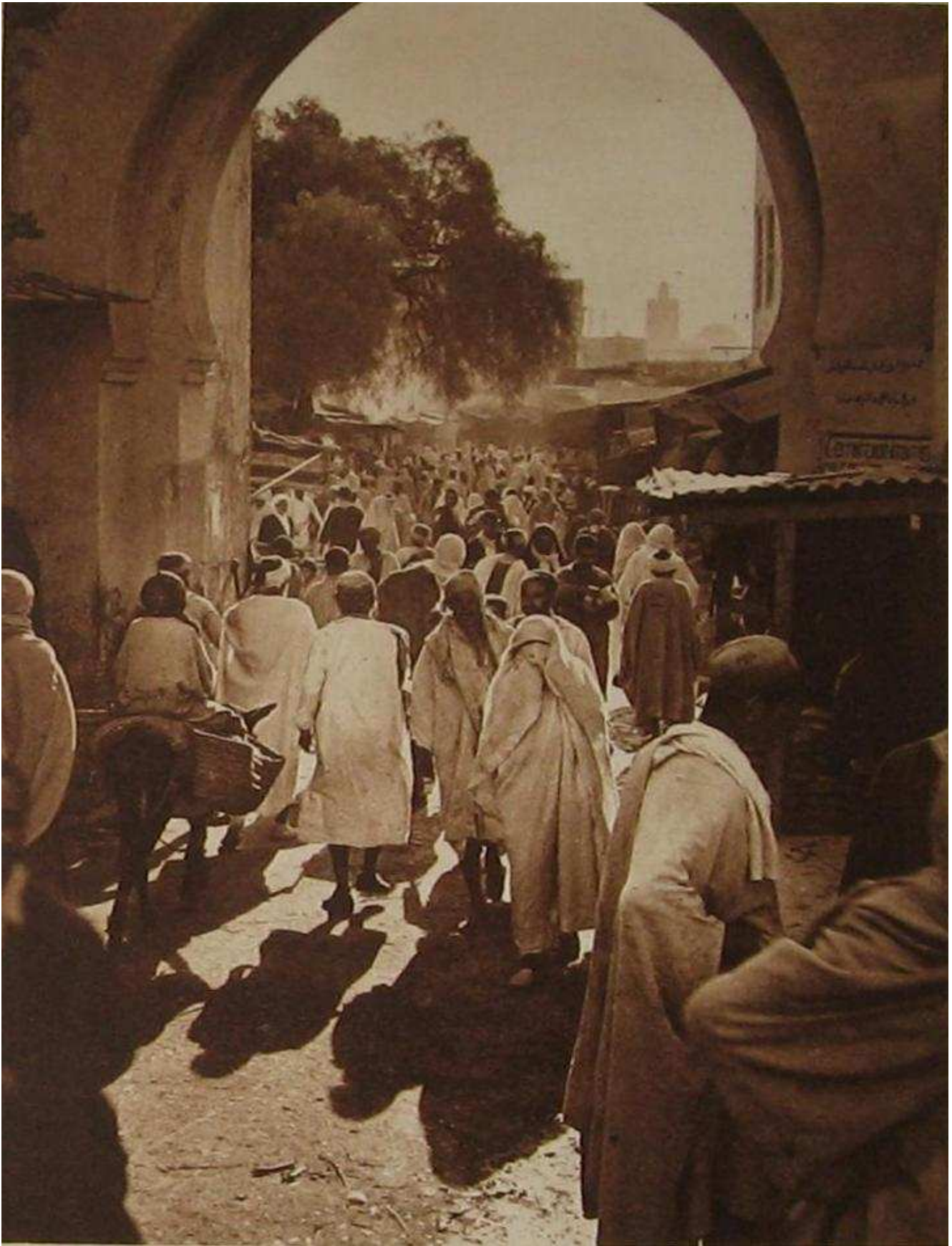
Ah! what an astonishing thing is the native Sfax! From the start a dominant impression: Sfax, the capital of Southern Tunisia has always been, like Fez the capital of Northern Morocco, a rich, powerful and coveted city, therefore military and obligatorily protected by ramparts. Here, the walls which enclose the city form a quadrilateral of six hundred metres by four hundred. The houses are packed, tangled up, some are attached to the ramparts, dominated by a wall all around, the others launch wooden balconies onto the street, others more or less aligned, encroach on the narrow streets with their displays.

In these restricted streets, what turmoil. Everything reminds me of the city of the Moroccan sultans: noisy souks, quarrels of the salesmen, songs of the children, nasal and penetrating gramophones. However, the general cry which, in Fez, is “Balek... Balek...” intended to attract the passers by, becomes here more polished, less imperative with “Barra Sidi... barra”.

The architecture also differs. In Sfax, it is less austere, less savage than in Fez. The mosques less dark, are opened to view. The doors of the houses are less protected. When one knocks at a native door, one does not see the aggressive head of a negro guard appear, as in Fez.



YOUNG TRADESMAN IN SFAX



SFAX, GATE OF THE CITY

But between them, the two cities, everything is similar... Swarming with people, smells, public auctions, cries, clandestine negotiations.

This morning, at the new market, I attended the sale of fish. Inside, the official sale is mundane but outside it the sales place, the shouted auction, is really typical. There are thirty or forty men lined up gesticulating in the middle of an enormous gathering. Their din and their cries recall those of the Stock Exchange in Paris or elsewhere, but here, of course, everything is simpler, more comprehensible, more popular. The rise and the fall of the values, of fish that is, is the result of the catch. The rate of the sale is thus established from the beginning and the purchases could continue in the amiable manner in which it began... But that would not be Islamic. These people count it more enjoyable and more entertaining to cook slowly under the national sun, themselves and their fish and to thus spend several hours in infernal a *tohu bohu* for a few *sous*.

After the sale of the fish which takes place in the morning, the bidding continues in the souks of the Arab city during the afternoon, especially Fridays. The calls are rife continually. Never mind who sells and never mind what, while crying. Here is a Jew who names a price for a splendid lady's jewel. It begins at 500 francs to reach 2,000. Alongside him and with the same earnestness, a child sells four used small tomato sauce boxes... for two francs. Further along, a negro disposes of a burnous; he is impatient and insults the passers by because he does not find takers.

Purchasers and salesmen pass through the souks appearing indifferent. For half an hour or an hour, they turn, return, chat with friends, giving themselves time to reflect. Lastly, tired, they buy or give up the goods. Jewels, fabrics, food, ruined and unusable alarm clocks, old drums, glasses with only one glass... everything is on sale and the merits of the most extraordinary things are sung and preached to the passers by.

But alongside this to-ing and fro-ing of criers, here, and more serious, are some craftsmen grouped by streets and trades. Sfax provides the fabrics, the jewels, the utensils to all the nearby villages. In the blacksmiths' quarter – very animated on

market days – a whole black world works for their countrymen. At the carpenters' souk this craftsman tries to mount an old rifle on a barrel that he has carved in wood; another, working on a trunk he has just made, throws the variegated colors of a multitude of flowers which he is drawing according to an layout unchanged for hundreds of years.

How strange is the street of fabrics, located beneath high white arches, and this souk of the dyers where, by their thousands, fabrics of the the most diverse form and color hang on bamboo poles... this market which, appropriately set up in the open air in front of the large mosque, scents the whole area: the perfume souk. More than fifty merchants are set up on a small high platform about a meter above the ground. Squatted behind their inventory, they proclaim the qualities of their perfumes. One is specialized in the essences of remote Arabia, another in the local fragrances, another in the perfumes of France. I see, spread out over a small carpet, the most expensive bottles. A negro enjoys a marked success with his specialities from Sudan and the desert. In the strange boxes on which one still reads the name of a local pharmacist or reputed speciality, the man with the lips of blood has an astonishing range of perfumes. I venture to smell them myself. Remarkably, I recognize indeed the odor which obsessed me in Southern Tunisia, made of rural plants, lavender, thyme with something tawny, unheard of, inimitable.

